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ABSTRACT

Small tangible rewards for student progress, such as candy bars, pens, or ribbons, add potency to the verbal and written praise offered by the teacher, thus increasing student motivation. Giving students small prizes enhances the cooperative atmosphere of learning, especially for those who do not normally do well. Research indicates that low student motivation, passivity, and lack of parental interest are key problems in American education. Students often feel discouraged about their abilities to compete academically with their peers, and see little connection between school curricula and future employment. In middle schools, motivation begins to move from an intrinsic desire and curiosity to an extrinsic hope of achieving external reward, inhibiting motivation. Numerous examples illustrate how motivational prizes or "bribes" effectively induce student motivation. Undoubtedly, there are also shortcomings in the repeated use of extrinsic rewards. But a sample of 25 anonymous student comments about the practice of rewarding them extrinsically were overwhelmingly positive. Until it can be shown that the practice is immoral or educationally unhealthy, the practice of giving rewards and treats can be recommended among English teachers. (HB)

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Bribes or Rewards

In my twenty-seven years of teaching, I have gladly and willingly spent approximately $300 a year on "rewards, treats, and trinkets" to enhance my instruction of 9th grade English. They are nothing of major value: a gift coupon from 7-11 for a free Slurpee; a pen embossed with "My Teacher Thinks I'm a Very Special Person"; a candy bar; a miniature, rubber mouse to augment the teaching of Daniel Keyes' Flowers for Algernon; and blue ribbons that proclaim "First Place." As a result, I've found that small tangible rewards for unexpected progress, for outstanding completed assignments, for participation from an exceptionally shy teen, for the personal sharing of a memorable moment in a student's life in a composition add potency to my verbal praise, a complimentary note on a composition, and public recognition outside the classroom through publishing or public readings. My giving of these small prizes enhances the cooperative atmosphere of learning, sharing and doing well in class, especially for those who do not ordinarily succeed in school. Thus, I was shocked when a parent complained that I

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"bribed" my students. He claimed that there was a plethora of research and literature that condemned this practice. What surprised me most was that for all these years, I had never considered the practice of giving rewards as "bribing." For the first time, I began to ask myself why I saw it as necessary to my teaching's effectiveness, so I examined the available literature on the subject.

Most educators would agree that students' interest and motivation in school has decreased. American students devote much less time and energy to the task of learning than do students in other industrialized societies. For example, American students average nearly twenty absences a year; Japanese students only three a year in spite of the fact that school years are longer in Europe and Japan. For example, Japanese high school graduates average the equivalent of three more years in a classroom than American graduates. Studies of time use and time-on-task show that American students actively engage in a learning activity for only about half the time they are in school. U. S. students reported spending an average of 3.5 hours per week on homework. When homework is added to engaged time at school, the total time devoted to study, instruction, and practice is only 18 to 22 hours per week--between 15 and 20 percent of the student's waking hours during the school year. In comparison, the typical U.S. senior spent 10 hours per week in a part-time job and about 24 hours per week watching television. Students in other nations devote much more time to studying and thus must spend

considerably less time watching TV (Bishop 27).

What is even more shocking than the little time devoted to learning is the intensity of the student's involvement in the process. At the completion of his study of American high schools, Theodore Sizer (1984) characterized students as "All too often docile, compliant, and without initiative," and John Goodlad (1983) described "a general picture of considerable passivity among students." High school teachers surveyed by Goodlad ranked "lack of student interest" and "lack of parental interest" as the two most important problems in education (Bishop 28).

This lack of interest makes it difficult for teachers to be demanding, but some are able to overcome these obstacles and induce their students to undertake tough learning tasks. But for almost all teachers, student listlessness is demoralizing. Educators are assigned to set high standards, but no help is given them to induce students to meet or surpass the proscribed academic goals, so most rely on the force of their own personalities. The National Association of Secondary School Principals concludes that, "All too often, teachers compromise academic demands because the bulk of the class sees no need to accept them as reasonable and legitimate" (Bishop 28).

A study, sponsored by the Center for Advanced Resource Studies, the National Center for Research in Vocational Education and the Secretary of Labor's Commission on Workforce Quality and Labor Market Efficiency concluded that the lack of incentives for

effort and learning accomplishment is a consequence of three phenomena:

1. Peer groups actively discourage academic effort and achievement.
2. Admission to selective colleges is not based on an absolute or external standard of achievement in high school subjects. Instead, it is based on aptitude tests which do not assess the high school curriculum and on such measures of student performance as class rank and grade point average, which are defined in terms of classmates' performance and are not relative to an external standard.
3. The labor market has failed to reward effort and achievement in high school. (Bishop 29)

The study concludes that, unlike scout merit badges where recognition is given immediately and again at periodic courts of honor for achieving a fixed standard of competence, schools measure achievement and performance relative to fellow students through grades and class rank. When students study hard and excel academically, they set themselves apart, cause rivalries, and might make relationships worse among friends. So, when it comes to academics, a student's success is purely personal. Consequently, most students perceive the chance of receiving recognition for academic achievement to be so slim they give up trying. By ninth grade, most students are already so far behind the leaders that they believe they have no chance of being perceived as academically successful. Their reaction is often to dismiss other students who take learning seriously and to honor other forms of achievement--athletics, a part-time job, dating, performing, drinking, and being "cool"--which offer them better chances of success (Bishop 29).

In addition, the study determined that most students see

very little connection between how much they learn and their future success in the labor market. Less than a quarter of tenth graders believe that geometry, trigonometry, biology, chemistry and physics are needed to qualify them for their first choice of occupation. Statistical studies of the youth labor market confirm their skepticism about the benefits of taking tough courses and studying hard. Only 6.6 percent of high school seniors take the Advanced Placement Exams. National tests, the SAT and the ACT, which do influence college admissions are multiple choice exams that do not fully and accurately assess the student's knowledge and understanding of literature, history, science and technology (Bishop 30).

The study goes on to say that the parents of a child not planning to go to college have an even weaker incentive to demand high standards at local high schools. They believe what counts in the labor market is getting the diploma, not learning algebra. "They can see that learning more will be of only modest benefit to their child's future, and that higher standards might put at risk what is really important--the diploma," authors of the study say (Bishop 31).

So what does this mean for those of us in the classroom trying everyday to motivate both the reluctant student and those able to expend even more energy than they are presently putting forth? Admittedly for some, "intrinsic motivation" or the reward for an activity is the activity itself--the decision to act comes from within the learner; it is not imposed from the outside. The

reason or stimulus is curiosity, challenge, personal development, or interest. It is a common belief that a really good teacher is one who takes the responsibility to try to induce within students a sense of internal reward in the very activity of learning itself. The student becomes involved and active in his own process of learning. Then, "challenge-seeking" and "self-fulfillment" are the major mechanisms that motivate his behavior. Most parents believe that students bring this native, intrinsic curiosity and motivation to school with them, but somehow in the process of formal education, it often gets changed for a number of reasons. When it changes, so too does the process or context of learning.

Many middle school teachers report that students in the first year of English classes are very enthusiastic and find their studies extremely enjoyable. However, three years later, enjoyment decreases. Why? The Research Group for College English Teaching in Japan at Keio University claims that what is happening in the educational system to bring about this change in attitude is that the intrinsic motivational pattern changes to extrinsic (Keio 3). Studying English as fun or self-rewarding by itself becomes an activity constrained by the need for success on external examinations. Soon, students begin to view the behavior of studying English as an instrument for achieving the external reward (examination success) instead of purely for the intrinsic pleasure of learning English, and soon, students perform only for extrinsic rewards. Their intrinsic motivation decreases, and

their persistence in the absence of extrinsic rewards lessens.

In "extrinsic motivation," the motive for the activity is stimulated by an outside reward or goal, such as money, prizes, high grades or entrance examination scores, but it can also be in the reverse form--deprivation of rewards, avoidance of punishment, fear of failing grades, freedom from confinement, etc. In nearly every school, a certain population of students resides who through a series of unhappy, stressful school experiences comes to regard the school environment with a sense of helplessness. Certainly, an intrinsically motivated student will develop and apply a wider variety of learning skills demanding higher cognitive functions, while an extrinsically motivated student will usually rely on memorization as the easiest and most efficient means of passing an examination, material crammed into memory at the very last moment just before an examination and consisting of small details rather than material put in a context or meaning as a whole. In light of the Center for Advanced Resource Studies' findings that today's students are more disengaged from learning, I think one would have to agree that intrinsic motives are far better and more permanent, but when students lack such motivation, extrinsic rewards are necessary, if only for short term goals and if only to encourage performance at a lower cognitive level.

Obviously, I am not alone in my practice of using "bribes" or rewards. Local businesses in our metropolitan area have indicated a willingness to award movie tickets and pizzas to

students who repeatedly make the honor roll. Authors Peters and Waterman in their book, IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE, found that workers do their jobs better when they are rewarded or recognized on formal occasions, and, more importantly, at unpredictable moments when supervisors see them doing their jobs well and initiating improvements (Peters 234). Let me cite some other examples I've encountered:

In 1984, the Abingdon (Illinois) School District used incentive programs to encourage their students to show up, on time, every day. Donald Smith, principal of Abingdon Junior High School, said, "I tried to accentuate the positive," and he did through a point system he devised for his school's 200 seventh and eighth graders. Through points, students won prizes, such as a ten-speed bicycle, a black and white television, a portable radio, walkie-talkie and baseball mitt. He not only improved attendance but improved the school's state aid receipts, which are determined in part by the number of students' absences. "During a couple of months, we cut absenteeism in half," Principal Smith reported. "At this age level, the students need to be rewarded more frequently," so the principal is now planning some less expensive and more frequent awards, such as a pizza party at the end of each grading period for forty students with the highest point score (Beetler 40).

Similar strategies have been enacted at Central High School in Louisville, Kentucky, in which items like pens, key rings, and eligibility for cash prize drawings boost attendance (Hawkins).

Likewise, Lincoln High School in Portland, Oregon has developed its own special strategies for reducing absenteeism called the "Lincoln Lotto," where an administrator draws a student ID number from a pool, and if that student had perfect attendance and no tardies the previous day, he or she wins $5 and is recognized in the daily bulletin. Vice-Principal Chet Moran says that this strategy has real impact on student attitudes because students try to stay eligible for the prize (Lachenmeir).

To motivate slow learners and discipline-problem pupils to improve their writing skills, a reinforcement program was developed in Baltimore, Md. Twenty-four eighth graders were given points in the form of currency, exchangeable for sweets or special privileges. When asked what "goods" they would like, the students listed candies, chewing gum, cake, Cokes, comic books and special privileges. To encourage students to seek more abstract goals, a progress chart served as a secondary

reinforcer, motivating students to seek success itself instead of concrete rewards. The experiment indicated that a systematic program of concrete reinforcement is practical and effective in changing the learning styles and behaviors of previously unmotivated students. It was a built-in hypothesis of the program that as the boys experienced success in school, success itself would become the prime reinforcer, and this hypothesis proved accurate. Two broad areas of behavior change emerged for the group as a whole: the students acquired independence and a willingness to attempt the unknown. Thus, it was evident that the students were able to take from their eighth-grade English class something more important than the specific skills they had learned. Some of them discovered academic success for the first time; others developed pride in their efforts and confidence in their abilities. At the end of the study, the students didn't behave like "slow learners." A systematic program of concrete reinforcement was indeed practical and effective in changing the learning styles and behaviors of the previously unmotivated students. Harold H. Cohen, Director of the Institute for Behavioral Research, said, "Experienced teachers have a wide repertoire of gimmicks and materials guaranteed to bring a wondering mind to instant focus on the subject at hand." The larger question, though, seems so be how long such motivation remains effective? That has yet to be answered (Nichols 36-41).

In the Second Annual Walt Disney Company Presents the American Teacher Awards, Edward M. Schroeder of Coolidge Junior High School in Granite City, Illinois, won from 36 finalists. A teacher for 29 years, Schroeder currently teaches regular eighth-grade and gifted English classes. He makes learning fun by surprising students and using unusual incentives to motivate them. For example, a student received a limousine ride home from school at the end of the semester for his improved attendance efforts (Bianchini 2).

Students at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N. Y., were given a new incentive to give fair and honest evaluations of their courses. They were paid. Two or three students in each of fifteen classes met with their professors once a week to discuss how the class was going and what could be done to improve it. In return, each student received $100. Dean of the Undergraduate College, Herbert Richtol, said that all the professors involved have said it was working out well, and the practice would continue each semester (NYT 3).

Lebanon Valley College, outside Harrisburg, PA, offers students who are in the top 10 percent of their high school graduating classes an opportunity to pay only half the normal tuition of $12,500. Those in the second 10 percent will pay only two-thirds, and those in the third 10 percent will pay three-quarters. "We need to put goals in front of people," observed

Lebanon Valley's president, John Synodinos. "We haven't been doing that" (Synodinos).

I find it remarkable that the teachers students remember the most are those who gave rewards or "treats."

Daniel Navarro, a University of Maryland senior, was asked to name the teacher who most influenced him. He said, "It had to be Mrs. Estelle Moore, my third-grade teacher at Harmony Hills Elementary School, in Montgomery County, the woman who used a bag of candy to instill in me the tough discipline of learning" (Leff C3).

Patrice Small, a freshman at Sherwood High School, in Sandy Spring, Maryland, wrote about her favorite third-grade teacher, Mr. Marcus.

> Every Friday, in Mr. Marcus' class, he would let us have popcorn and gave out Good Worker awards. They were given out if you did all of your work that week and turned it in on time. Every week, Mr. Marcus would pick one person out of the class and buy that person a soda. I loved his class.

Another Sherwood freshman, Dwayne Brown, wrote,

> My all-time favorite teacher was Mrs. Dockworth because she always gave us candy for being good, and at the end of the month, all the people who didn't get checks after their names got to have a pizza party. If more people were like Mrs. Dockworth, the world would be a better place.

And Mike Brown, another Sherwood freshman, wrote,

> My all-time favorite teacher was my third grade teacher, Mrs. Coon. She would put candy in our desks if they were clean before we left school. She called it the Desk Fairy. For that, I'll never forget her.

Social Studies teacher John Zahner at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School in Bethesda, Md., stole an effective technique from a junior high teacher he once had. Mr. Zahner places trivia history questions at the end of his daily quizzes for "Zahner Bucks," coupons worth credit. If a student misbehaves, he has to forfeit a "Zahner Buck," and at the end of the semester, John holds a blind auction where students cash in their "Zahner Bucks" to win one of John's outlandish neckties that he wears daily or

some artifact from his basement or attic. He sees this technique as an effective motivator for all his students, but particularly for those who feel pressured by daily history quizzes. John has also had to create better questions. "Growing up in the 70's, I probably was more accepting of sexism and an abundance of sports trivia," he says. "Now, my questions are more inclusive and fair." A popular second-year teacher, John will continue using "Zahner Bucks" because his students look forward to that little extra question each day that can win them a teacher's tie or knick-knack (Zahner).

No doubt there are many examples of the failings of extrinsic rewards and the central question of their longevity in affecting learning is still unanswered. I queried my own students about the practice of rewarding them extrinsically, and the comments, made anonymously, were overwhelmingly positive:

I think it makes people want to present orally more.

For doing good work, it gives you a sense of accomplishment when you receive it.

I like the "munchies" especially because it boosts your confidence when you get one and also helps you get up and talk when you know you have a treat waiting.

I think it's worth doing because the person who does the work needs a reward for doing a good job.

When you give out prizes, I enjoy them because it makes me feel that I can accomplish more and it makes me want to get a good grade.

It is a fun idea because I know if I do well, I'll get something afterwards.

It helps to motivate me.

I like it because now I have a better reason for doing things right--not just learning for tests.

It helps because it inspires me to do well to get a reward.

It acts as a stimulant to make people do their work--gives us more incentive.

Treats help because I have a goal so I can get my work done--a little treat won't hurt anyone.

It's an added plus to class.

It's pretty cool--I think it's a good motivator in a symbolic way.

It gives me a reason to do the work. I hate doing vocab but now I do it all and I do it carefully.

It helps because it makes you want to get the right answer because you know you are going to get rewarded.

It helps 'cause people try to do more of their work.

Then, of course, there were those who disagreed:

It doesn't have any effect in our class because people still don't do the work.

It has no effect on me. I try to get an A, not a snake /sic/.

Getting munchies is O.K. for most people--they would do their work for that, but me, I really don't care.

It has no effect on me because I never do the work.

Getting treats has no effect on me. Teachers should not have to do it. Kids should just do it without a reward. (Author's note: This comment came from a true intrinsically motivated learner.)

It doesn't really matter because I go for the grade.

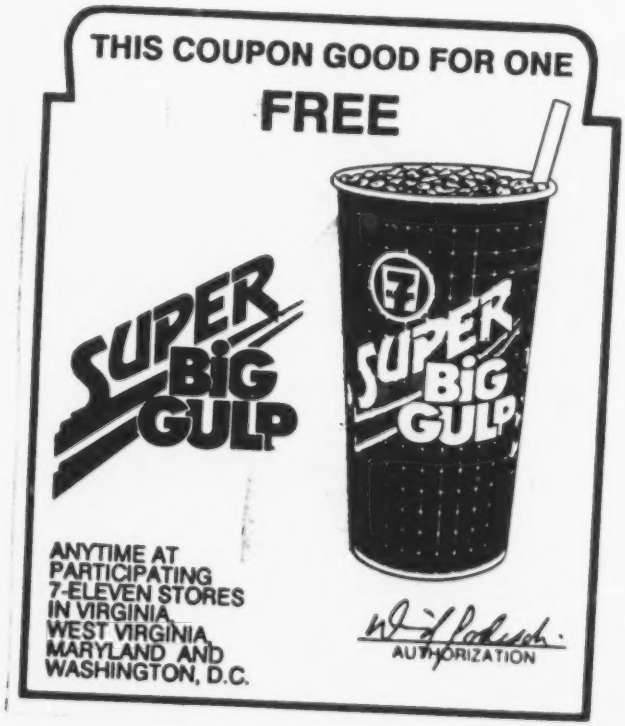
It doesn't help me. I can always get treats. I do my homework so I will get better in vocabulary. I'm more concerned about getting a grade.

People aren't going to do their homework just because they want a treat!

It helps for some people. I myself really don't care as long as I try.

I will probably continue the practice of giving trinkets, treats, and rewards until I am convinced that such a practice is

immoral, unconstitutional or educationally unhealthy. The irony of this parent's charge of "bribery" is that I recently received a key-chain that proclaimed, "Teachers are special." What a joy! Admittedly, this treat did not affect my overall job performance, but I appreciated the small token, and as the above student said, "... a little treat won't hurt anyone."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ANYTIME AT PARTICIPATING 7-ELEVEN STORES IN VIRGINIA, WEST VIRGINIA, MARYLAND AND WASHINGTON, D.C.
AUTHORIZATION

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